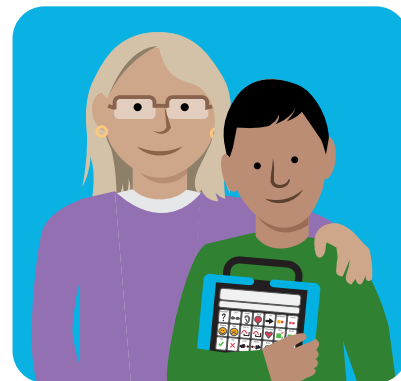# Inclusive Practices for Multilingual Learners With Disabilities: Advocacy, Planning, and Collaboration

Introduction

Let's begin by meeting a student named Hugo. Hugo is a multilingual learner who has been identified with having a disability. I (the author) first met Hugo's mom, Araceli, at an early learning center where she guided classrooms of young toddlers. We collaborated over a period of two years, during which Hugo would accompany her in the classroom from time to time. Araceli opens up about Hugo's educational experience as both a language learner and an individual with Coffin-Lowry Syndrome (CLS). His story is complex and touching—just like any student we may meet along our professional journey. The following is a description of Hugo as told by Araceli.

> Hugo is 8 years old. He's a sweet, sensitive, and empathetic soul with a big heart and strong preferences. He loves being around people who love him, enjoys helping others, and is incredibly reciprocal—if you're kind to him, he'll give it right back. He likes his toys and his phone, preferably both at once. He's got a big sense of justice (hates fighting), likes routine, and seeks approval from others. He's funny, observant, and surprisingly exact. Once you teach him something, he'll repeat and learn it exactly as shown.

Hugo has been in school since he was 6 months old, attending seven different schools across Mexico and the U.S. His experiences range from Montessori and traditional to special education settings. While every setting taught us something, special education has been the most supportive in helping him develop his skills. At the start of one school year, Hugo came home with a black eye. I waited two days for an explanation—nothing. But they did reach out to ask for diapers. That lack of care and basic humanity was deeply disappointing.

Hugo understands Spanish (his first language), English, and sign language. He learned Spanish at home, sign language in his first school (by observing a classmate who was deaf!), and English through videos and school. At first, I thought he preferred English, but I realized he was more drawn to the sounds in English. The most amazing moment was when I discovered he had learned sign language on his own, just by observing how others communicate. I noticed he uses his [spoken] language only when he reaches a point of deep need or fear. The word "mamá" comes out only then. That contrast broke my heart but also showed me how urgent it was to help him communicate better. At home, we use Spanish mostly, but we support his communication in all the ways he understands: signs, gestures, or his device. In the community, he navigates mostly with signs or non-verbal cues.

Hugo has Coffin-Lowry Syndrome. Before the diagnosis, there were many unanswered questions. Now that we understand his condition, specialists have started making referrals. Sadly, in the school setting, the diagnosis has not been used to support his potential. Sometimes it feels like it's used as an excuse rather than a guide to better help him. Often, schools treat his diagnosis as a reason to check boxes instead of as a guide to help him thrive. I wish educators would take the time to really read and understand the diagnoses—not for legal protection, but for meaningful support.

The teachers who have made a difference are those who see Hugo as a child first—not just a student with challenges. They are patient, believe in him, and treat him as an equal, even when he struggles to believe in himself. The biggest success came with a teacher who truly cared about Hugo. She fought for him, even when the school didn't back her up. Parents supported her because we saw she cared. That same teacher would email us regularly and always kept us informed. Her communication created a community; parents worked together, and Hugo thrived in her class. The challenge? Teachers who are indifferent, disconnected, or simply uninformed.

Right now, Hugo is just starting to receive better support, including a special communication device. But I'd love for schools to also teach him more sign language and integrate it with his device. Language is not just speech—it's expression. I encourage him to use his words, whether that's sign language, his device, or spoken. We also attend speech therapy and practice communication during daily routines.

Hugo is an example of a growing trend of students who have been identified as needing both language development and disability-related services across the United States. From 2006 to 2020, the population of multilingual learners that have been identified with a disability has increased by nearly 50% (Cooc, 2023). With this dramatic rise comes a deep desire from educators to better understand how to support the intersection of language and disability given the unique needs of this population and the multi-faceted considerations it demands. **Multilingual learners with disabilities** is a broad term for a diverse group of students whose needs vary greatly and widely. However, all can thrive when educator teams

and the systems they work in are built to be cohesive due to intentional efforts to integrate and coordinate the educational experiences of two specializations that have historically been siloed. From policy and programming decisions to instructional planning and collaborative practices, serving multilingual learners with disabilities through an asset-based approach can unite these efforts and result in a school environment that is inclusive and responsive to their academic and socioemotional needs.

Recent research highlights how school systems often fall short in meeting the needs of students like Hugo, underscoring the urgent need to better understand how to serve and instruct multilingual learners with disabilities in K–12 schools. With half of multilingual learners with disabilities in some states reaching Long-Term English Learner (LTEL) status (Sahakyan & Ryan, 2018) (Kangas, 2024), lower rates of inclusion in the general education classroom (Cooc, 2023), and academic struggles and placement into less challenging academic courses (Kangas & Cook, 2020), educators can bring about change by examining our own contexts and finding opportunities to advocate for students in ways that respond to their needs. But where to begin when there is so much to understand and consider in addressing this complex intersection?

This Focus Bulletin provides educators with knowledge, resources, and tools to support advocacy for multilingual learners with disabilities while also guiding reflection on instructional planning and collaboration. By addressing the intersection of language and disability through a strengths-based lens, we can make informed decisions and communicate strategically to positively shape the lives and educational experiences of all the students in our classrooms.

Useful Definitions

Multilingual learners: Students who come in contact with and/or interact in languages in addition to English on a regular basis. WIDA uses this term to describe students who have been identified as needing language development services.

Students with disabilities: Students who have been through the special education referral and identification process for a disability, some of which may have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans, while others may not require either.

Multilingual learners with disabilities: Students who are developing more than one language and have an identified disability.

Students who are dually identified: A term that can be used to describe the programming classification that multilingual learners with disabilities may participate in, so they receive both language support and accommodations for their disability.

English learners (ELs): A term used by the federal government to identify students who qualify for language support services.

Accessibility: A system of approaches and supports that ensures full, meaningful, and valid access to instructional and assessment content, processes, and procedures by meeting individual needs and preferences of all students, irrespective of their individual characteristics.

Building Advocacy Through Understanding

Understanding students' rights and the rights of their caregivers is a critical starting point for our advocacy efforts as it informs us of what is afforded to them by law. It is through the identification process that multilingual learners with disabilities are legally granted two sets of services: those that address their disability-related needs and those that address their language-related needs. Federal laws state that neither set of services supersedes the other, and practices that deny equal access to these services violate students' civil rights. Prioritizing one set of services over another, either purposefully or incidentally, prevents multilingual students with disabilities from having full and meaningful access to learning opportunities. According to Cooc (2023), classifying students for dual programing "may lead schools to prioritize special education services over language needs (Kangas, 2018)." When this occurs, students may end up missing out on language services, and consequently, "without dual services, ELs with disabilities may be unable to develop English language proficiency, which would further compound learning challenges and may lead to more intensive services outside of the general education classroom. The lower rates of general education placement for ELs with disabilities, however, even for additional supports, may limit the social benefits of interacting and learning with peers without disabilities" (Cooc, 2023).

Laws and regulations exist to protect students who have been identified as English Learners, dating back to 1964 with the Civil Rights Act, and for students who have been identified with a disability, beginning with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. However, it was not until 2015 that federal guidance was issued specifically and explicitly to address what equal access legally entails for students who receive both language development and disability-related services. Two federal documents can support schools and school districts in understanding their responsibilities in serving multilingual students with disabilities: The "Dear Colleague" letter (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2015) and the "Equal Access to Elementary and Secondary Education for Students Who Are English Learners With Disabilities" fact sheet (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). (Note: While the "Dear Colleague" letter was rescinded in August 2025, the information included in it remains relevant, as the court decisions [i.e., *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974] and the federal laws [i.e., Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015] remain in place.)

By adhering to the guidelines outlined in these documents, schools can create inclusive systems and structures that address the intersection of the specialized and programmatic needs of multilingual learners with disabilities. Inclusive systems create the foundation for settings where all individuals responsible for the growth of multilingual learners with disabilities—teachers, specialists, caregivers—can work cohesively by sharing expertise and responsibility to maximize student learning and potential.

The following chart synthesizes concrete actions from the "Equal Access to Elementary and Secondary Education for Students Who Are English Learners With Disabilities" fact sheet to exemplify the statement: "Schools must provide students who are ELs and also have disabilities with both the EL services and disability-related services to which they are entitled under federal law" (U.S. Department of Education, 2024, p. 2).

Ways to Ensure Equal Access to Educational Opportunities for Multilingual Learners With Disabilities

Actions to Support MLs With Disabilities	Potential Policy Violations (Depending on the Facts and Circumstances)
• Provide accurate and timely identification and evaluation of ELs and of students with disabilities. • Evaluate ELs for a disability in an appropriate language based on their needs and language skills. • Provide students with disabilities appropriate disability-related services when schools evaluate their English language proficiency. • Communicate with a multilingual parent or guardian in their preferred language about their child's disability-related services. • Design services and make placement decisions for ELs with disabilities using information from a variety of sources, including the social or cultural background of the student, and those knowledgeable about the student. • Provide appropriate language and disability-related services per civil rights and educational case laws. Refer to the "Legal Obligations for Equal Access to Education for Multilingual Learners With Disabilities Flyer" outlining their educational rights.	• Delaying disability-related evaluations, placements, or services because of a student's English-language needs, or vice versa. • Conducting Section 504 evaluations only in English for ELs instead of determining the appropriate language based on each student's needs. • Identifying ELs with disabilities by using criteria that measure and evaluate the student's English language skills. • Making a student who is eligible for both EL and disability-related services (or the student's caregiver) select either type of services. • Scheduling EL and disability-related programming at the same time, forcing students to miss one or the other type of services. • Delivering disability services exclusively in English, even when an EL requires support in another language. • Separating ELs with disabilities from peers when not required for provision of services.

Additional potential policy violations are listed in the "Equal Access to Elementary and Secondary Education for Students Who Are English Learners With Disabilities" fact sheet. Furthermore, educators can use the "Legal Obligations for Equal Access to Education for Multilingual Learners With Disabilities Flyer" to support their advocacy efforts by understanding the rights of students who are multilingual learners with disabilities and the rights of their caregivers.

Since laws and regulations drive programs and services, and programs and services create the circumstances and context of instructional planning and collaboration, educators who have a full understanding of students' and caregivers' rights can be informed advocates. While individual educators do not have the capacity to upend institutionalized and siloed systems, we do have the power to advocate for our ability to adequately serve students and their caregivers when 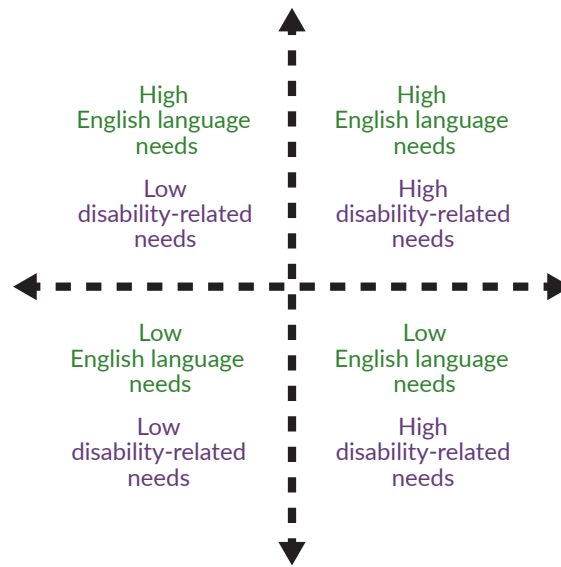we recognize specific and discreet practices that are detrimental to the success and efficacy of our efforts. Think about Hugo's teacher and the profound impact that her advocacy efforts not only had on Araceli's sense of trust, but also on that of the classroom community as a whole. When educators advocate for change, we contribute and commit to a culturally and linguistically sustaining environment.

> While individual educators do not have the capacity to upend institutionalized and siloed systems, we do have the power to advocate for our ability to adequately serve students and their caregivers when we recognize specific and discreet practices that are detrimental to the success and efficacy of our efforts.

Planning Instruction for Multilingual Learners With Disabilities

Language and Disability Framework

When addressing both language and disability in the school setting, decisions should be individualized and respond to students' unique needs. To support this reflective thinking, the Language and Disability Framework (Shyyan & Christensen, 2018; Shyyan et al., 2016) is a tool educators can use (Figure 1). The framework puts language-related needs along one continuum and disability-related needs on the other, creating a matrix of four quadrants in which students can be placed. A student's placement within the matrix reflects the intensity of the needs that a student's language and disability-related considerations present in instructional settings. It was "developed to help educators better understand how these two categories of needs apply to each student and to help them customize instruction and assessments accordingly" (Shyyan & Christensen, 2018). A critical component of this framework is that a student's placement is fluid. Educators should expect a student's position to change as they develop their language proficiency and grow academically with the proper use of scaffolding and supports. The framework emphasizes viewing language and disability as intersecting, not separate, so educators can better identify the combined instructional and assessment supports students need. Placement in the matrix should be a collaborative starting point for determining tools and strategies that address both language- and disability-related considerations .

Figure 1: Language and Disability Needs Framework

High
English language
needs

High
English language
needs

Low
disability-related
needs

High
disability-related
needs

Low
English language
needs

Low
English language
needs

Low
disability-related
needs

High
disability-related
needs

If we consider Hugo, what information did Araceli provide that would support determining his placement on the matrix? What information may be missing, and what additional questions would you ask to compile a more comprehensive picture of Hugo's needs? As an initial starting point, we may align him to the high language and high disability needs quadrant to determine the resources needed in each learning environment to promote his access and growth in language and communication. Thereafter, collaboration should continue as Hugo's educator team, alongside Araceli, examine and assess the viability and success of those supports.

Planning for Accessibility Alongside Language Development

Building an accessible learning environment from the start ensures that the supports and tools students need to access rigorous learning are readily available for their flexible use. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to guide the design of learning environments based on the idea that all learners are unique, and by planning for learner variability from the onset, all learners thrive. Grounded in neuroscience, UDL offers a research-based approach that is "recognized as having a transformative impact

on education over the past four decades, and can be . . . found in key federal laws guiding education, such as . . . (the) Every Student Succeeds Act and the Higher Education Opportunity Act" (CAST, n.d.). Organized around the why of learning (engagement), the what of learning (representation), and the how of learning (action and expression), the UDL framework provides guidelines and considerations that educators can apply to classroom instruction to support the design of accessible learning environments. The "Universal Design for Learning Example Ideas" handout includes each consideration within the UDL guidelines and highlights example ideas that elevate the strengths of multilingual learners.

Students who are multilingual learners with disabilities benefit greatly from environments that apply UDL guidelines, which emphasize learning through multiple means. The WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, describes this multimodal approach as "inherent to and essential for how students make meaning and engage in disciplinary practices. All students are able to both interpret and express ideas with greater flexibility when using multimodal resources, including multiple languages. Multimodality allows all students to use multiple means to engage, interpret, represent, act, and express their ideas in the classroom" (WIDA, 2020, p. 22). To contextualize the importance of multimodality in classroom settings, let's think about Hugo and list all the ways through which he makes meaning: gestures, non-verbal cues, signing, his device, English, and Spanish. A classroom that integrates this abundance of resources into the learning environment will provide Hugo with the greatest opportunities to access instruction and expand upon both his communication and language skills during learning.

In addition to multimodality, UDL also promotes the design of access points. "Multilingual learners with exceptionalities need access points to the curriculum. Access points can be conceptualized as gateways to the core intent of the grade and age appropriate standards that apply to all students in the same grade. The term access point is often used in relation to students with exceptionalities to help educators teach their curriculum without compromising rigor. In terms of instruction, access points may differ for all students. Think of a student, for example, that excels in math but is struggling when reading a complex text. This student's access points into the curriculum may represent different types of scaffolds and levels of challenge" (Honigsfeld & Cohan, p. 108).

> **Multimodality**
>
> "In addition to the use of spoken and written language, students also communicate through gestures, facial expressions, images, equations, maps, symbols, diagrams, charts, videos, graphs, computer-mediated content, and other means."
> — WIDA Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, p. 22.

UDL recognizes and honors the role that language, identity, and culture play in making learning accessible. However, the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, contains lesson planning considerations that embody the core WIDA belief that "multilingual learners are best served when they learn content and language together in linguistically and culturally sustaining ways" (WIDA, 2020, p. 9). These lesson planning considerations are organized in three categories—pedagogy, lesson flow, and assessment—and address the distinct ways in which instruction can be designed, so that the cultural and linguistic assets of multilingual learners are centered and leveraged in the meaning making process

WIDA ELD Lesson Planning Considerations

Pedagogy

Instruction is asset-based, and culturally and linguistically sustaining by leveraging what we know about our students, such as their

- Backgrounds
- Assets
- Preferences
- Previous experiences
- Language proficiency levels

Students are provided multiple means of engagement, action and expression, and representation to

- Interact with one another
- Acquire knowledge and skills
- Express their thinking (multimodal communication, use of multiple languages)
- Engage in disciplinary practices

Lesson Flow

Integrated learning is taking place by providing opportunity for students to

- Learn content and language concurrently
- Expand upon their interpretive and expressive language

Organization and pacing of lessons incorporate

- A logical sequence towards complexity and independence
- Bridges from familiar experiences to new ones
- Adequate use of scaffolding for challenging tasks

Assessment

Instruction is responsive and data-informed by using

- Flexible data gathering
- Multimodal representations of learning
- Proactive and continuous methods

Learning targets include content and language goals that are

- Aligned
- Clear
- Actionable
- Measurable

Adapted from the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, p. 249

The following three educators deliver instruction to multilingual learners with disabilities through varying roles and capacities. They each reflect on their approaches to meeting the language and disability needs of their students by employing practices that embody both the UDL and the WIDA ELD Standards frameworks.

Sabrina Curry

Sabrina Curry, a lead interventionist and special education teacher, shares how she incorporated multiple means when delivering a recent social studies unit in her fourth grade class that explored the inquiry question "How does the past shape our future?" through studying the Oregon Trail.

Sabrina Curry

I am a firm believer that all students learn differently. So, I like to incorporate things across different modalities. When you introduce things across different modalities, it moves the information to long-term memory. The inquiry project that we did for the Oregon Trail incorporated diary writings, journals, drawings, research, and interviews. The students were able to choose what format they liked based on their strength area. I also provided visuals, and that was [done] through video, anchor charts, as well as any flashcards that students may have needed. Because I knew this was not [part] of their background knowledge–[the] Oregon Trail, it's something that I wasn't even familiar with. So, I made sure that I went back and I frontloaded the information with vocabulary words, showing them videos to make a connection on what it was like to leave home, what is it like to be with a family, what is it like to travel, and to move, so that when they were getting the information, they were able to make a connection.

Another key thing that is so important in a classroom is peer collaboration. During peer collaboration, students are able to hear what their peers are saying. Sometimes when you have a dually identified student, their processing is much different. So, through peer collaboration, it helps them to hear what their peer is saying, and then they're able to share out. As a teacher, I want to hear how they're thinking, I want to hear how they process, and I want to hear how they're answering and asking questions. There's always discussion and student discourse. I also make sure that I always give students free rein to tell me how they understand the information the best, that they learned that information. One student could give me an answer orally where another student may be more comfortable with writing it down.

Rana Khan

Rana Khan, a middle school special education teacher, shares how she approaches planning instruction for her classroom with multimodality and access points in mind.

Rana Kahn

I always approach planning instruction for my multilingual learners with disabilities with the goal of building independence. I teach students how to turn on and use tools embedded within their school issued devices to read text and to compose and edit their writing. In doing so, students have a higher sense of independence and autonomy. I also try to incorporate as many access points as possible, particularly with visuals and audio. When incorporating audio or video in a lesson, I make use of the accessibility tools already embedded in many platforms. For example, I turn on subtitles in a student's first language as I present the video. When presenting content, it is critical to use visual aids. This may include photographs, videos, emojis, diagrams, and even real objects. Allowing students to make this connection between the vocabulary or concept that they are learning and an actual image, video, or object helps make the ideas I'm presenting less abstract. Additionally, I use concise language and repetition to help make my lessons clear and to help make learning stick. This may include call and response, songs, even rhymes that I make up. I try to be creative!

Models are another critical way to help multilingual learners with disabilities access learning. I explicitly model by showing students my thinking process and completing the same learning tasks that they will be required to do. Also, rather than having the model fully completed ahead of time, I work through it in real time to show the cognitive lift and the process we have to go through in order to complete the work. It also helps to make common errors and work through correcting or revising them in front of students rather than presenting a perfect final piece of work.

This video clip shows Rana reflecting on the use of these strategies in her Personal Narratives unit.

Although it is useful to have high quality models available for students to reference as they work, it is critical that they're given access to the process as well as the product during instruction.

Isasol Chapa

Isasol Chapa, an EL program coordinator and bilingual and special education teacher, shares how in her early elementary classroom she designs lessons that are inclusive to multilingual learners with disabilities by planning for the integration of content and language in accessible ways.

Isasol Chapa

I always have a language objective alongside a content objective in a lesson. When I explain the content goal, I refer to the language goal as the means of how we are going to learn it. During instruction, I am very careful to communicate which exact language skill we are working on in the language goal; for example, if it is to listen, to speak, or to discuss. I also put the language and content objectives in student friendly terms. This way, students can tell it back to me. As you teach, it is important to have the kids tell you the learning goals in the way **they** see it.

I often use student-led anchor charts during my instruction. The anchor charts are heavy with visuals and vocabulary, so students have a gist of what the lesson will entail before moving forward. The lesson-specific anchor chart is always up during instruction, so I can refer back to it to prompt students to reflect. In first grade, we recently did a unit on story elements. For this anchor chart, we divided it into sections for each of the different elements, such as character, setting, theme, and we added a lot of pictures and vocabulary. It was always up every time we engaged with that lesson, so I could prompt students to look back, think about a question I asked, and refer to what they had drawn or written. I also used bubble maps as a tool for understanding setting. For some students, they drew pictures; and for some students, they wrote words or sentences, based on their language proficiency. For plot, we used a sequencing map to show the beginning, middle, and end. Also, based on their proficiency level, they would show their understanding by drawing a picture, writing a simple sentence, or writing multiple simple sentences using sentences stems.

I also make adjustments to lessons so they connect to my students' lives. For example, with the story elements unit, the classroom was reading the book *The Little Red Hen*. I looked for a book that was in Spanish that had the same concept, and I chose *Las Tortillas del Burro*. I chose it because it had a lot of visual aids and because it was tied to their culture and to the content objective. Most of my kids are Latino and most of my kids eat tortillas. So, it helped them to understand what the story was about, because it reflected something that **they** eat. They were able to say, "Oh, I watched my mom do this, I've watched her with the corn, or I've watched her knead the dough." For me, it is very important to have a lot of background knowledge and provide it in their own culture. That way, I'm able to transfer that into the learning and get more buy-in from the kids.

To plan for accessibility alongside language development, educators can use the "Reflection Tool: UDL and Language Considerations for Instructional Planning" handout. This tool highlights a sampling of strategies to consider as educators plan units and lessons for multilingual students with disabilities. It was created by extracting ideas from the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, and the UDL guidelines.

Collaboration in Service of Instructional Planning

Including Multiple Perspectives Through a Strengths-Based Approach

Including multiple perspectives when collaborating to plan instruction for learning environments that include multilingual learners with disabilities is essential. Insight from those with the greatest expertise on who students are will shape decision-making, so that instruction is rigorous, high-quality, and responsive to their needs. By bridging expertise among colleagues, educator teams can grow professionally, build deeper understandings of individual students, and work towards an integrated approach to language and disability as a collaborative practice. These collaborative efforts help teachers and service providers team up and avoid what Kangas (2017a) calls the "specialization trap, whereby teachers and specialists conceptualize their work in terms of boundaries corresponding to their own specialization (p. 267) . . . "leaving unaddressed the unique needs of this population at the intersection of language learning and disabilities" (Yanno & Kangas, 2024, p. 323).

Sabrina explains how she takes a unified approach to collaboration: "I've learned that collaboration for dually identified students works best when it's not about dividing tasks, but rather being the subject

matter experts for each lane represented. Ultimately, collaboration for multilingual learners with disabilities is about building bridges to create a beating path to success, so that language and disability supports reinforce one another."

When collaborating for any student or groups of students, including multilingual learners with disabilities, taking a strengths-based approach is pivotal to student success and agency. By viewing culture, language, and identity as valuable resources to embed and uplift in learning opportunities, we emphasize the importance of these elements in the meaning-making process. In Hugo's case, Araceli describes how a deficit mindset about his CLS diagnosis has been consequential to his path to success, because it was used as an "excuse," a "reason to check boxes," and only for "legal protection." As educator teams come together to plan for the greatest educational outcomes for their students, which includes fostering independence and removing any barriers an environment may present, an asset-based mindset is critical, as it shifts thinking from limitations to capabilities.

Isasol reflects on how she contributes to a strengths-based mindset when collaborating with colleagues: "It's important to have an open conversation and open dialogue from day one and establish that you are always coming from a place of yes: "Yes, I'm going to help my student. Yes, I can move forward with them. Yes, they are going to learn." I think one of the biggest things as a teacher is to reflect and come from a place of yes."

> **Collaborative Practice**
>
> "Collaboration should increase in schools as professionals realize that no one professional perspective can address all multilingual learners' needs. These collaborative relationships require professionals to step outside their traditional roles and share their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences with colleagues through creative programming." — Hamayan, E., Marler, B., Sánchez-López, C., & Damico, J. (2023)
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> "Collaboration is a fluid, complex co-generative process: Educators working together, relying on each other, building on each other, and building on each other's strengths." — Honigsfeld, A. & Cohan, A. (2024)

Collaboration With Family and Caregivers

When considering the perspectives to incorporate when making decisions for instruction in classrooms that include multilingual learners with disabilities, none is more critical than that of a student's family and/or caregivers. This perspective supports educators in discovering what makes each student unique, and in applying an asset-based approach, the distinct characteristics of the family and student that can be integrated into the learning environment as resources. Specifically, when planning instruction for students who are multilingual learners with disabilities, understanding both the language and disability aspects from the family's perspective can give educators valuable insight on how to incorporate the strategies and tools used at home in school settings. To support this productive and meaningful dialogue, educators must foster a two-way communicative approach that engages families as advocates as well as funds of knowledge or resources for learning.

Thinking about Araceli, you might have been wondering through what channels and in what context the story of Hugo was collected and shared. His narrative is detail-rich, candid, and reflective. Wouldn't it be helpful if we had this for every student we taught? The answer may be an emphatic yes, but keep in mind that any deep and meaningful information gathering is purpose-driven and takes trust, time, and effort. All these factors were in place to foster meaningful collaboration with Araceli. She engaged in dialogue with an educator with whom she had built a trusting relationship over a sustained period of time, through verbal and written communication in both English and her home language, Spanish, and with a clearly communicated purpose: to better understand Hugo as a person and a learner.

While every educator–caregiver conversation is unique and context-driven, there are some overarching themes of meaningful collaboration between home and school when it comes to understanding a child's language and disability needs. The following questions can be used as starting points for educator teams to reflect if the manner in which they are engaging with families and caregivers promotes advocacy and the sharing of valuable information helpful for instructional decision-making.

Reflection questions for educator teams to consider when engaging . . .	
Caregivers as advocates	Caregivers as funds of knowledge
- Are they informed of their legal rights? - Are they informed on how to best prepare for Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or school-based meetings? - Are they aware of the communication channels at school, and who to contact with questions and concerns? - Do they receive information about their child that is helpful for decision-making, and delivered in an asset-based approach? - Do they have a clear understanding of the language and disability supports and services provided to their child?	- What are the home literacy practices? - What are the previous school experiences? - What are their successes, hopes, and dreams? - What are their concerns and challenges? - What are their home routines? - What strategies, resources, and tools are used at home to support their language and/or disability-related needs?

Rana reflects on the importance of including families in the collaborative process.

Getting input from parents and making sure that they feel valued as partners is so critical. They're the experts on their kid. No one knows their child better than they do. So, for them to feel valued and like they are part of the team is essential. Make them part of the decision-making process. They may have some insight on approaches that you may have not considered. It's also important not to make any assumptions about goals they may have, both short-term and long-term for their child. Take into account the cultural considerations during these conversations. The way that the child is supported, the expectations that they may have can be different from family to family, but it is important to build trust. I think you really have to work at it, and it's not always easy. Just like you have to work with the students, it also takes time with the parents. I think parents put so much

trust in us as educators, whether you are serving students who have disabilities, who are language learners, or not, they need to know that we care for their child as much as we possibly can.

Including caregiver perspectives in the collaborative process is most authentic when we utilize the information provided to make meaningful decisions for students. Hugo's story illustrates the depth of knowledge that educators can gain when they engage families as advocates and rich sources of information to positively impact the way the child experiences school.

The following if-then statements could bridge Araceli's information to school-based practices:

- If Hugo likes routine and repetition, then utilizing multimodal learning strategies such as Total Physical Response (TPR) and mnemonic devices will support his acquisition of knowledge and skills.
- If Hugo uses signing and gesturing to communicate at home and around the community, then creating a shared understanding of those communication methods with teachers and peers at school will support his right to communicate as a valued member of the community.
- If Hugo knows Spanish, English, and American Sign Language (ASL), then including materials in all three will support his learning by valuing and building on his language strengths.
- If Araceli has experienced deficit-based attitudes about Hugo in the past due to his disability diagnosis, then listening to her about how CLS shows up uniquely in Hugo and focusing on what he **can do** will build trust.
- If Araceli has desires for increased use of sign language within Hugo's device, then educator teams can integrate these goals into his learning plans, including his IEP.
- Reflect: What other if-then statements could be made to bridge Hugo's home to school life?

Advice to Families

"Advocate, persist, and don't let anyone define your child's worth by their diagnosis."
— Araceli Mora

Key Takeaways on Collaboration

Successful collaboration in service of instructional planning is proactive, continuous, and reflective. As educators, service providers, leaders, and caregivers unite to make collaborative decisions for learning environments that include multilingual learners with disabilities, conversations should embrace varied perspectives, center students' assets, and foment partnerships. The following pieces of advice are helpful reminders that **how** we collaborate is just as important as **why** we collaborate:

"Everyone's going to have a different perspective, and the experience forces you to be reflective. Am I really listening the way I need to be listening? How am I really pushing forward?" – Isasol Chapa

"There's so much we can learn from each other as educators, even if we're not teaching the same content. It's important to break down silos, and truly see both students with disabilities and ELs as our students versus they're your/my students." – Rana Khan

"Collaboration is strongest when every voice at the table is valued equally. Each role sees the student from a different lens: academic, linguistic, behavioral and/or social. Collaborating as a team will ensure that universal supports are put in place and students are set up for success across all settings." – Sabrina Curry

"My advice to educators is don't look for immediate results. Be consistent, be patient, and remember: repeating something daily works. It may be hard for 3 months, but after that, it just becomes part of your rhythm." – Araceli Mora

WIDA FOCUS BULLETIN >> CLOSER LOOK

The Information Collection Tool is designed to support educators in reflecting on student intersections of language, disability, home, community, and academics. By exploring the guiding questions within this tool collaboratively with colleagues and caregivers, it will support educator teams in having a clearer and deeper understanding of the information to consider when making decisions that affect a student's school and classroom life.

Final Thoughts

Supporting multilingual learners with disabilities requires fervent advocacy, strategic and collaborative decision-making, and a steadfast commitment to engaging caregivers proactively and continuously. This endeavor cannot be done alone, nor should it be. Building capacity to employ an integrated approach to language and disability through these efforts takes time, shared responsibility, and the support of school leadership. However, individual educators can take small, incremental steps with intention and care that make all the difference in students' lives. The following ideas are possible bridges you can build to strengthen your role in this mission:

- Who is a parent or caregiver you would like to better engage with? What asset-based question can you start with to open the doors of communication to better understand their child? Remember, translation tools are available. They might not be perfect, but the effort to communicate may speak volumes to families. Start a conversation. Let it grow from there.
- What resources can you share with a colleague that invite their perspective? For example, consider sharing an idea or tool from this Focus Bulletin and introducing it with a learner's mindset. You could begin with something as general as, "I came across this resource and found it interesting. What do you think?" Listen to them. Ask for feedback. Nurture the professional relationship.
- How can you step outside your instructional toolkit to boost accessibility and language development in your learning environment? Is there one strategy, one tool, or one resource you can try out in a lesson? It may feel like a risk, and even clumsy at first, but this exploration is what centers students in the learning process. Grab a colleague, experiment together, and reflect as an instructional team.

As educators and their teams look to build inclusive practices for multilingual learners with disabilities, we must remember that the viability of our advocacy, collaboration and planning resides in the power of human dialogue. In dialogue we can listen honestly, broaden our perspectives, and deepen our understanding. Paolo Freire (2017) reminds us that "dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. . . . Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human." In serving multilingual learners with disabilities, our dialogue brings us closer to a cohesive approach to student intersections by honoring the wholeness and complexity of the human identity, rather than viewing and treating individuals as a mere sum of its parts.

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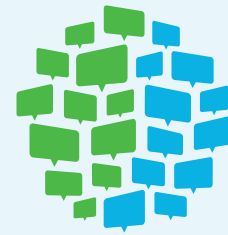
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